

THE SELF IN A CONSUMER SOCIETY

Zygmunt Bauman

The economic engines of the postmodern society, Zygmunt Bauman argues, have powerful stratifying effects on social life, creating divisions that, at the extremes, lead to almost diametrically opposite individual experiences of time, distance, and place. "We are all on the move," he writes, but at the rich and affluent end of the hierarchy, individuals experience themselves participating and exulting in the movement characteristic of contemporary life, while those at the other, impoverished end are helplessly driven by it. Those at one end experience space as a freedom; those at the other end experience it as bondage. Here Bauman discusses in general terms the ceaseless drive toward change inherent in consumerism and the vast economic inequalities that it produces.

Zygmunt Bauman, Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the Universities of Leeds and Warsaw, is the author of many books, including Modernity and the Holocaust, Postmodern Ethics, and Globalization: The Human Consequences.

OUR POSTMODERN SOCIETY is a consumer society. When we call it a consumer society, we have in mind something more than the trivial and sedate circumstance that all members of that society are consumers—all *human* beings, and not just human beings, have been consumers since time immemorial. What we do have in mind is that ours is a “consumer society” in the similarly profound and fundamental sense in which the society of our predecessors, modern society in its industrial phase, used to be a “producer society.” That older type of modern society once engaged its members primarily as producers and soldiers; society shaped its members by dictating the need to play those two roles, and the norm that society held up to its members was the ability and the willingness to play them. In its present late-modern (Giddens), second-modern (Beck), or post-modern stage, modern society has little need for mass industrial labor and conscript armies, but it needs—and engages—its members in their capacity as consumers.

The role that our present-day society holds up to its members is the role of the consumer, and the members of our society are likewise judged by their ability and willingness to play that role. The difference between our present-day society and its immediate predecessor is not as radical as abandoning one role and picking up another instead. In neither of its two stages could modern societies do without its members producing things to be consumed, and members of both societies do, of course, consume. The consumer of a consumer society, however, is a sharply different creature from the consumer of any other society thus far. The difference is one of emphasis and priorities—a shift of emphasis that makes an enormous difference to virtually every aspect of society, culture, and individual life. The differences are so deep and multiform that they fully justify speaking of our society as a society of a separate and distinct kind—a consumer society.

Ideally, all acquired habits should “lie on the shoulders” of that new type of consumer just like the ethically inspired vocational and acquisitive passions used to lie, as Max Weber repeated after Richard Baxter, “on the shoulders of the ‘saint like a light cloak, which can

be thrown aside at any moment.”¹ And the habits are indeed continually, daily, and at first opportunity thrown aside, and never given the chance to firm up into the iron bars of a cage (except one meta-habit: the “habit of changing habits”). Ideally, nothing should be embraced by a consumer firmly, nothing should command a commitment forever, no needs should be seen as fully satisfied, no desires considered ultimate. There ought to be a proviso “until further notice” attached to any oath of loyalty and any commitment. It is the volatility, the in-built temporality of all engagements that counts; it counts more than the commitment itself, which anyway is not allowed to outlast the time necessary for consuming the object of desire (or the desirability of that object).

That all consumption takes time is in fact the bane of the consumer society and a major worry for the merchandisers of consumer goods. The consumer’s satisfaction ought to be instant and this in a double sense. Consumed goods should bring satisfaction immediately, requiring no learning of skills and no lengthy groundwork, but the satisfaction should end the moment the time needed for consumption is up, and that time ought to be reduced to bare minimum. The needed reduction is best achieved if the consumers cannot hold their attention nor focus their desire on any object for long; if they are impatient, impetuous, and restive; and above all if they are easily excitable and predisposed to quickly lose interest. Indeed when the waiting is taken out of wanting and the wanting out of waiting, the consumptive capacity of consumers may be stretched far beyond the limits set by any natural or acquired needs or designed by the physical durability of the objects of desire. The traditional relationship between needs and their satisfaction is then reversed: the promise and hope of satisfaction precedes the need promised to be satisfied and will be always greater than the extant need—yet not too great to preclude the desire for the goods which carry that promise.

¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1976) 181.

As a matter of fact, the promise is all the more attractive the less the need in question is familiar; there is a lot of fun in living through an experience one did not know existed. The excitement of a new and unprecedented sensation—not the greed of acquiring and possessing nor wealth in its material, tangible sense—is the name of the consumer game. Consumers are first and foremost gatherers of sensations; they are collectors of things only in a secondary and derivative sense. As Mark C. Taylor and Esa Saarinen put it, “Desire does not desire satisfaction. To the contrary, desire desires desire.”² Such is the case at any rate with the ideal consumer. The prospect of the desire fading off, dissipating, and having nothing in sight to resurrect it, or the prospect of a world with nothing left in it to be desired, must be the most sinister of the ideal consumer’s horrors (and, of course, of the consumer-goods merchandiser’s horrors).

To increase their capacity for consumption, consumers must never be left to rest. They need to be constantly exposed to new temptations to keep them in the state of perpetual suspicion and steady disaffection. The bait commanding them to shift attention needs to confirm the suspicion while offering a way out of disaffection: “You reckoned you’d seen it all? You ain’t seen nothing yet!” It is often said that the consumer market seduces its customers. But in order to do so, it needs customers who want to be seduced (just as to command his laborers, the factory boss needed a crew with the habits of discipline and command-following firmly entrenched). In a properly working consumer society, consumers seek actively to be seduced. They live from attraction to attraction, from temptation to temptation—each attraction and each temptation being somewhat different and perhaps stronger than its predecessor. In many ways they are just like their fathers, the producers, who lived from one turn of the conveyor belt to an identical next.

² Mark C. Taylor and Esa Saarinen, “Teleroitics,” *Imagologies: Media Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1994) 11.

This cycle of desire is a compulsion, a must, for the fully-fledged, mature consumer; yet that must, that internalized pressure, that impossibility of living one's life in any other way, is seen as the free exercise of one's will. The market might have already selected them as consumers and so taken away their freedom to ignore its blandishments, but in every successive visit to the market-place, consumers have every reason to feel that it is they who are in command. They are the judges, the critics, and the choosers. They can, after all, refuse their allegiance to any one of the infinite choices on display—except the choice of choosing among them.

It is the combination of the consumer, constantly greedy for new attractions and fast bored with attractions already had, and of the world in all its dimensions—economic, political, personal—transformed after the pattern of the consumer market and, like that market, ready to oblige and change its attractions with ever accelerating speed, that wipes out all fixed signposts from an individual map of the world or from the plans for a life itinerary. Indeed, traveling hopefully is in this situation much better than to arrive. Arrival has that musty smell of the end of the road, that bitter taste of monotony and stagnation that signals the end to everything for which the ideal consumer lives and considers the sense of living. To enjoy the best this world has to offer, you may do all sorts of things except one: to declare, after Goethe's *Faust*, "O moment, you are beautiful, last forever!"

And so we all travel, whether we like it or not. We have not been asked about our feelings anyway. Thrown into a vast and open sea with no tracks and milestones fast sinking, we may rejoice in the breath-taking vistas of new discoveries or tremble out of fear of drowning. How does one voyage on these stormy seas—seas that certainly call for strong boats and skillful navigators? This becomes the question. Even more so when one understands that the more vast the expanse of free sailing, the more the sailor's fate tends to be polarized and the deeper the chasm between the poles.

But there is a catch. Everybody may be cast into the mode of consumer; everybody may wish to be a consumer and indulge in the opportunities which that mode of life holds. But not everybody can be a consumer. Desire is not enough; to squeeze the pleasure out of desire, one must have a reasonable hope of obtaining the desired object, and while that hope is reasonable for some, it is futile for others. All of us are doomed to the life of choices, but not all of us have the means to be choosers.

But you can tell one kind of society from another by the dimensions along which it stratifies its members, and, like all other societies, the postmodern, consumer society is a stratified one. Those “high up” and “low down” are plotted in a society of consumers along the lines of mobility—the freedom to choose where to be. Those “high up” travel through life to their hearts’ desire and pick and choose their destinations by the joys they offer. Those “low down” are thrown out from the site they would rather stay in, and if they do not move, it is the site that is pulled from under their feet. When they travel, their destination, more often than not, is of somebody else’s choosing and seldom enjoyable; and when they arrive, they occupy a highly unprepossessing site that they would gladly leave behind if they had anywhere else to go. But they don’t. They have nowhere else to go; there is nowhere else where they are likely to be welcomed.